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John Pilkington
University of Mississippi

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The Genesis of *Mr. Isaacs*

John Pilkington, Jr.

In 1881, when F. Marion Crawford came to this country after receiving an education in Italy, Germany, and England and editing an Anglo-Indian newspaper in India, he had no idea that he would soon write a novel.¹ A little more than a year later, he had written *Mr. Isaacs: A Tale of Modern India* (1882),² thereby beginning a career which would lead him to the publication of almost fifty novels and a measure of lasting fame as the most consistently popular fiction writer of his day. The circumstances which led to the writing and publication of his first novel do not indicate that he was a born novelist, but they do provide a valuable commentary upon the initial phases of what was to prove a remarkably successful literary career.

Two possible sources for the initial idea of the story of *Mr. Isaacs* have been suggested by Mrs. Maud Howe Elliott in *My Cousin, F. Marion Crawford*. Since she wrote her book, additional information has become available that helps to correct and elaborate her statements. As the basis of her most extensive account of the inception of *Mr. Isaacs*, Mrs. Elliott relies upon the memory of George Brett who in 1882 was employed in the retail store of the Macmillan Publishing Company; in later years he was to be president of the company and one of Crawford's most intimate friends. Mrs. Elliott quotes Brett as saying:

Mr. Ward [Sam Ward, Crawford's uncle], Crawford and I dined together at the Brevoort House [in New York], and at that time Crawford told us the story of Mr. Jacobs [to be Isaacs in the novel]. Crawford was greatly disturbed because he did not know what to do, had failed in several

The Genesis of *Mr. Isaacs*

things, singing in the opera, teaching Sanskrit, carrying on of the Indian paper. There was a discussion as to what Crawford should do. I said, "There is no question what you should do,—write out that story."³

That Mrs. Elliott was not entirely certain about the accuracy of Brett's recollections is evident from her comment that "Uncle Sam [Ward] always claimed the credit of having advised Marion [Crawford] to write the book about Mr. Jacobs, the diamond merchant at Simla."⁴ But she continues, "One thing is certain—Marion's destiny was fixed that night when he, Uncle Sam and the young Brett, now the head of The Macmillan Company, dined together at the old Brevoort House, at Fifth Avenue and Eighth Street."⁵

Brett voiced his recollections of the occasion to Mrs. Elliott as she was writing her book about Crawford. A much earlier account of the affair was given by Crawford himself to Robert Bridges in an interview published in *McClure's Magazine* in 1895. According to Bridges, Crawford said that "'this is exactly how it happened'":

On May 5, 1882, Uncle Sam asked me to dine with him at the New York Club, which was then in the building on Madison Square now called the Madison Square Bank building. It goes without saying that we had a good dinner if it was ordered by Uncle Sam. We had dined rather early, and were sitting in the smoking-room, overlooking Madison Square, while it was still light. As was perfectly natural we began to exchange stories while smoking, and I told him, with a great deal of detail, my recollections of an interesting man whom I had met in Simla. When I finished he said to me, "That is a good two-part magazine story, and you must write it out immediately." He took me around to his

apartments, and that night I began to write the story of "Mr. Isaacs."⁶

There is considerable difference between Brett's account and Crawford's version. Crawford places the dinner at the New York Club located on the corner of Madison Avenue and Twenty-third Street in Madison Square. Brett recalls the dinner as having taken place at the Brevoort House at Fifth Avenue and Eighth Street. Crawford implies that only he and Sam Ward were present; whereas Brett notes that all three men participated in the conversation. For the reason to be noted below, the identity of the man who originated the plan is perhaps not of vital significance; Crawford's version, nevertheless, seems the more accurate one, because his statement is closer in point of time to the actual event and because he should have known the facts. His comment, moreover, is fully substantiated by a letter which he wrote to Sam Ward on August 22, 1882, about a month after the novel was completed. Crawford wrote: "I hope you will never forget that but for your suggestion Isaacs would never have been written and that I owe it therefore to you, as I do so many other things."⁷ One must remember that Brett was recalling events which had happened almost fifty years earlier and that there were a great many dinner parties which included the three men. The Brevoort House was a favorite eating place for the gourmet-minded Sam Ward; and it is quite likely that Crawford told the story more than once. Brett may have made his suggestion independently of Sam Ward. Crawford, however, gave the full credit to his uncle.

Crawford himself in recalling the circumstances surrounding the inception of *Mr. Isaacs* may have made an error, or Bridges may have quoted him incorrectly. In Bridges' quotation, Crawford said that he began the novel on May 5, 1882. This date is an obvious error, because on April 27, 1882, Crawford wrote to Sam Ward from Boston as follows: "I am at work on the story [of Mr. Isaacs] . . ."⁸ A letter from Sam Ward to Julia Ward Howe, dated Good Friday (April 7), 1882, New York, reveals that Crawford had been working in Sam

Ward's apartment on several articles for the *North American Review*.⁹ Since Sam Ward makes no mention of a work of fiction, very probably Crawford had either not begun it or had made very little progress with it. There are no extant letters mentioning Crawford from this time until April 27 by which date he had evidently been in Boston for some time. The best inference is that Crawford began to write his story during the early part of April. If Bridges wrote *May 5* by mistake for *April 5*, Crawford's version of the beginning of his fictional writing could be considered accurate in every respect.

From the evidence it seems clear that through Sam Ward's influence Crawford began to write in New York a magazine story based upon his experience in India. The venture conforms to the pattern of his other activities. Ever since Crawford's arrival in this country on February 14, 1881, Sam Ward had been endeavoring to help his nephew to find a suitable vocation. As Brett's recollections would suggest, Crawford had considered a number of possible openings, but he had not settled upon any one. He had abandoned teaching, singing, and politics. Most of his attempts had been outgrowths of his experiences in India, and by far the most successful had been his efforts to write, for which his work as editor of the *Indian Herald* had trained him. Sam Ward had introduced him to the editors of the most important New York newspapers for whom Crawford had written several articles; and Sam Ward had brought his nephew to the attention of several magazine editors, notably Richard Watson Gilder of the *Century Magazine* and Jeanette Gilder of the *Critic*. For the periodicals they represented Crawford had reviewed a considerable number of books dealing with India.¹⁰ In the context of his other activities, the suggestion on the part of either Sam Ward or George Brett that Crawford write a story about an incident which happened to him in India is not in the least surprising.

What was new in the suggestion, however, was that Crawford turn to fiction; heretofore he had written editorials, news-stories, essays, and reviews, but no fiction. He made the transition in what was

probably the easiest manner for him by narrating the story in the first person, using the fictional name of Paul Griggs. About this matter, there is certain evidence. A year after he published the novel, he wrote in a letter to A. Bence Jones: "I am the real Paul Griggs of the story . . . and the occasional allusions to my own history are for the most part true."¹¹ That *Mr. Isaacs* was a personal and at times autobiographical novel can scarcely be questioned.

At what point the "two-part magazine story" became a novel, however, cannot be precisely determined. Talking to Bridges in 1895, Crawford recalled that "part of the first chapter was written afterwards [that is, after he began to write in Sam Ward's apartment], but the rest of the chapter and several succeeding chapters are the story I told to Uncle Sam. I kept at it from day to day, getting more interested in the work as I proceeded . . ."¹² Since the chapters mentioned by Crawford deal principally with Paul Griggs' first meeting with Mr. Isaacs, the fabulously wealthy jewel merchant, and with the incidents of Mr. Isaacs' life prior to the opening of the events which take place subsequent to this meeting, one concludes that they represent the original story related to Sam Ward. By April 27, 1882, Crawford had made considerable progress, for on that date he wrote Sam Ward from Boston:

I am at work on the story—the character and personality of Jacobs [Isaacs] are a romance in themselves, *s'il en fut*. It is easy to make him fall in love with some fair English girl and to lead them through numberless adventures—weaving in stories of Nicoletts which I believe I told you—not to mention personal experiences in India."¹³

The inference is clear that Crawford began with the intention of featuring his first encounter with Mr. Isaacs—including an account of Mr. Isaacs' career up to that point—but as Crawford wrote, the possibilities of continuing Mr. Isaacs' adventures became so evident that Crawford continued to write. At some time he must have realized

that he had already reached a point beyond the limits of a "two-part magazine story." For this reason, he was forced to make additions to what he had already written. In all probability by April 27, he knew he was actually writing a novel.

Further light on the composition of *Mr. Isaacs* is afforded by Crawford's correspondence with Mrs. Isabella Stewart Gardner. In a letter to her apparently written from New York, Crawford talks about his method of writing. After discussing a chapter that had caused him "trouble and vexation of spirit," Crawford continues:

I shall not look at it again for a week—not until I read it to you—and then I may improve it. The people all say what I think they would, but they are *repeating parts*—there is not enough life in them. They ought to have more individuality and less Lindley Murray and syntax. I have made Isaacs tell his story, of course without my repeating any of it, and I have created a slight embarrassment for Miss Westonhaugh, and a little argumentative tiff, and I wound up putting Ghyrkins in a rage with Kildare's ideas about tigers. The latter, who is as brave as [a] terrier, has never seen a tiger, and talks wildly about them for the sake of egging Ghyrkins on. G[hyrkins]. at last vows that K[ildare]. shall see a live man eater before the week is out. Isaacs steals out to Miss W[estonhaugh]. while we are smoking, and I keep the men over their cigars as long as I can. So we break up[.] Tomorrow we have the polo, in the eighth chapter.¹⁴

This letter is convincing, for by using the pronoun *I* instead of the name Paul Griggs, Crawford clearly reveals that he has personally entered his novel as a character. Paul Griggs emerges in the novel

not only as the teller of the story but also as the literal representative of the author.

Since the passage in the novel dealing with Paul Griggs' efforts to detain the men over their cigars at the dinner party occurs at the end of chapter seven, Crawford was approximately half-finished with the work when he wrote the undated letter to Mrs. Gardner. Ahead of him were the episodes of the polo match, the tiger hunt, the liberation of Shere Ali, and the final scenes about the death of his heroine, Katharine Westonhaugh. Crawford had gone to New York on May 2 to visit his uncle, and by May 18 he was still in New York. A good guess as to the date of the letter to Mrs. Gardner would be shortly before May 18. He was evidently consulting Sam Ward about the development of the story, since in the letter to Mrs. Gardner he comments that "U[n]cle. S[am]. says I improve as I go and he likes the dinner party chapt[er]."¹⁵ Very probably he discussed with Sam Ward the final episodes of the work before returning to Boston. He had promised his cousin, Julia Anagnos, to visit her for ten days beginning June 1, and the tenor of his letter to Sam Ward, written from her home in South Boston on June 11, suggests that he has been there for some time. Crawford writes:

I have not written yet because I have been busy and have had nothing special of interest to tell you. . . .

Isaacs is practically finished. I have still a few final touches to put which are not a question of time, but of careful deliberation and when decided will not occupy more than an hour. Both Mrs. Gardner and Julia Anagnos cried vigorously over the death of the heroine, and were much excited in the scene when Shere Ali is liberated.¹⁶

Crawford had not written Sam Ward since he arrived in Boston; yet since he expected his uncle to know about the scenes at the end

of the novel, he must have either written a draft of the ending or at least discussed it thoroughly with Sam Ward before leaving New York.

Crawford's correspondence during April, May, and June, 1882, proves conclusively that he was very much indebted to Sam Ward and to Mrs. Gardner for their help and advice in the writing of *Mr. Isaacs*. In describing the composition of the novel to Bridges, Crawford mentions reading chapters "from time to time . . . to Uncle Sam,"¹⁷ but there is no reference to Mrs. Gardner. Yet his letters written during the actual time of writing the novel indicate that he sought her advice. In the undated letter to her already quoted, he concludes his discussion of the polo match in the eighth chapter by saying, "The last is so long that I think seriously of cutting it in two, but I will consult you about it before I make any change." And he adds, "You must be getting tired of my eternal talk about Isaacs." In another letter written to Mrs. Gardner, probably early in December, 1882, about the time he produced his second novel, he referred to *Mr. Isaacs* and to her part in its composition by saying, "I cannot realize that Isaacs is now before the world—it is a thing of the past to me, and I think of it as someone else's work—as indeed it is, love, for without you I should never have written it."¹⁸ Although Mrs. Gardner's influence cannot be pin-pointed, it is clear that she provided not only practical advice about plot and character interpretation but also the encouragement and stimulus for writing that Crawford very much needed during the time he was composing his novel.

The nature of Sam Ward's contribution has already been indicated. He not only suggested the possibility of making a story out of Crawford's experiences, but also worked directly with Crawford in realizing them in fiction. The extent of his hand in the novel can perhaps be best indicated by Crawford's remark in a letter to his uncle written on June 15, 1882, the date on which Crawford finished the novel. Crawford wrote: "Isaacs is entirely finished and

ready, if you will let me know what to do with it—whether to send it by express or to keep it until I come.”¹⁹ It was Sam Ward who made the arrangements to send the manuscript to the London office of the Macmillan Company, and it was Sam Ward who on August 21 telegraphed the good news from New York to Crawford in Boston: “MacMillan [*sic*] accepts isaacs [*sic*] and I have authorized him to put it immediately in hand. Terms ten percent of retail sales.”²⁰ Crawford’s first novel was a reality, and he was successfully launched as a novelist. In Mrs. Elliott’s words, “Marion’s destiny was fixed.”

George Brett was correct in his recollections of Crawford’s efforts to find a congenial vocation. In 1882 Crawford was a young man in his late twenties possessing a great deal of talent and for a person of his age an astonishing variety of experiences. His problem was to find the means to channel both ability and training into a field which would be attractive and at the same time financially rewarding. Sam Ward, who recognized that his nephew’s most probable chances of success lay in writing, suggested that he write a fictional story based upon his actual experiences and thereby, perhaps unwittingly, started Crawford on a career as a novelist.

Crawford did not begin to write *Mr. Isaacs* as a novel; instead he began a short story. When he had completed the story that had prompted Sam Ward to suggest the venture, Crawford “kept on writing, to see what would happen.”²¹ What happened was a novel plotted around a succession of episodes which Crawford realized would necessitate revisions and additions to the initial part. Perhaps the central feature of his method of composition was his identification of one of the characters of the novel with himself. In subsequent novels Crawford was to follow this practice repeatedly, sometimes using the name of Paul Griggs and at other times projecting himself as some other character. As he continued to write, he learned the necessity of deciding upon the complete plot of a work before he began to write, but the autobiographical content of his writing continued to be a significant ingredient of his fiction.

FOOTNOTES

¹Research for this article has been made possible partially through a grant from the faculty committee on research of the University of Mississippi. Quotations from the letters of Francis Marion Crawford to Mrs. Isabella Stewart Gardner and to A. Bence Jones have been made with the permission of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, Massachusetts. Quotations from the letters of Francis Marion Crawford to Samuel Ward and from the letters of Samuel Ward to Mrs. Julia Ward Howe have been made with the permission of the Houghton Library of Harvard University.

²The story, which is narrated by Paul Griggs, editor of an Anglo-Indian newspaper, deals with the adventures of Abdul Hafizben-Isak, a wealthy jewel merchant, who generally uses the name of "Mr. Isaacs." After their first meeting in a hotel in Simla, the two men become close friends. Griggs helps Mr. Isaacs to win the love of Katharine Westonhaugh, an English girl, and to liberate Shere Ali, an Indian leader in revolt against British rule. The plot is sustained through a number of incidents, including a polo match, a tiger hunt, and a desperate fight in a mountain pass. Near the end of the novel, Miss Westonhaugh dies of jungle fever; and Mr. Isaacs is last seen as he accepts the life of a religious.

³Maud Howe Elliott, *My Cousin, F. Marion Crawford* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1934), p. 127.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 128. Samuel Ward, the brother of Crawford's mother (Louisa Cutler Ward Crawford), had had an amazing career. Born in 1814, he was a child prodigy in mathematics. After graduation from Columbia at the age of seventeen, he studied mathematics abroad but soon lost interest in the subject. He returned to New York, worked for a time in his father's bank, and then became a prospector in the California gold rush of 1849. Within a few years he had abandoned the search for gold in California and become one of the first lobbyists in Washington. Meanwhile he had married twice; his first wife was the grand-daughter of John Jacob Astor and his second a celebrated beauty of New York society. By 1880, however, he was living by himself, nationally known as "Uncle Sam," and as good an example of a "universal genius" as nineteenth-century America produced. While his left hand was lobbying for magnates of big business, his right was busy in literary criticism, authorship, art collecting, and an endless round of dinner parties. He knew and charmed almost every celebrity of the time; he lived by his charm. Perhaps no other person in the United States was then better qualified to help a young man to a successful career.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶Robert Bridges, "F. Marion Crawford: A Conversation," *McClure's Magazine*, IV (March, 1895), 320.

⁷Letter to Samuel Ward, August 22, 1882, in the Houghton Library of Harvard University.

⁸Letter to Samuel Ward, April 27, 1882, in the Houghton Library of Harvard University.

⁹Letter from Samuel Ward to Julia Ward Howe, April 7, 1882, in the Houghton Library of Harvard University.

¹⁰Among these reviews were such books as Arthur Lillie's *Buddha and Early*

Buddhism, John Owen's *Evenings with the Skeptics*, T. W. Rhys Davids' *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion*, Thomas W. Knox's *The Boy Travellers in the Far East*, Major George A. Jacob's *A Manual of Hindu Pantheism*, and A. Barth's *The Religions of India*.

¹³Letter to A. Bence Jones, February 7, 1883, in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, Massachusetts.

¹²Bridges, "F. Marion Crawford: A Conversation," p. 320.

¹⁸Letter to Samuel Ward, April 27, 1882, in the Houghton Library of Harvard University.

¹⁴Letter to Mrs. Isabella Stewart Gardner, date missing, in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, Massachusetts; the italics are Crawford's. Later in the same letter, Crawford remarks: "This evening I do not know when I shall dine, but I shall write afterwards as much as I can of the polo match. Thank heaven, I am not tired yet, and I think I may carry it through. A polo game is a bright, easy thing to describe—all hoofs and clubs and galloping. It is much easier to describe an earthquake than a tea party—there is so much more of it."

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶Letter to Samuel Ward, June 11, 1882, in the Houghton Library of Harvard University. The record is very clear that Crawford wrote a considerable portion of the novel in New York and actually finished it at his cousin's house in South Boston. Mrs. Louise Hall Tharp has written that "it was Aunt Julia [Ward Howe] who ordered her nephew F. Marion to sit down at a table in her little garden in Newport and write at least eight hours a day until his novel was done"—*Three Saints and a Sinner: Julia Ward Howe, Louisa, Annie and Sam Ward* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1956), p. 281. Mrs. Tharp does not reveal the source for her statement; but if Mrs. Howe issued the order, Crawford did not obey. It is true, however, that a part of the novel was written at her house.

¹⁷Bridges, "F. Marion Crawford: A Conversation," p. 320.

¹⁸Letter to Mrs. Isabella Stewart Gardner, date missing, in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, Massachusetts.

¹⁹Letter to Samuel Ward, June 15, 1882, in the Houghton Library of Harvard University.

²⁰Telegram, August 21, 1882, in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, Massachusetts; *Mr. Isaacs* was published by Macmillan, December 5, 1882.

²¹Bridges, "F. Marion Crawford: A Conversation," p. 320.